



The  
Helen S. Stosberg  
Collection  
of  
Oceanic Art



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# **The Helen S. Slosberg Collection of Oceanic Art**

*In Memory of Her Brother Israel Sagoff*

Catalog by Bonny B. Saulnier

Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University

## Foreword

The Helen S. Slosberg Collection of Oceanic Art has enriched the cultural life of Brandeis University for more than fifteen years. Students of art history, anthropology, and related fields have reaped untold benefits from its presence here on the campus, particularly through its expansive permanent display in Schwartz Hall. For Mrs. Slosberg's generosity in making this material available to us, and for her concern in keeping the collection vital through ongoing gifts to it, the Rose Art Museum and the entire Brandeis community are deeply grateful.

For the production of this catalog we are as deeply grateful to Ms. Bonny Saulnier. A 1973 graduate of the University, Ms. Saulnier has now joined the permanent staff of the Museum after working here on a volunteer basis for the bulk of the past year. It was during the latter period that she undertook to research and organize the Slosberg collection in order to ready its contents for publication. The task was not small. The past fifteen years have witnessed an abundance of art historical and anthropological research in the field of Oceania. With it, we have had to reassess our notions of the geographic origins of numerous Oceanic objects and also their cultural functions. Our sense of what constitutes quality among them has naturally shifted as well. This is the situation which Ms. Saulnier not only confronted, but also illuminated for us — and she did so with steadfast dedication, thorough and convincing scholarship, and the highest level of taste and selectivity. Our pride in the Slosberg Collection is thus matched by our pride in Ms. Saulnier's job of work with it.

Carl I. Belz, *Director*

## Preface

Fifteen years ago Mrs. Helen S. Slosberg gave her first object of Oceanic art to Brandeis University. Over the years she has added piece after piece of art, as well as a magnificent installation in Schwartz Hall, to build for the University one of the outstanding collections of Oceanic art in New England. Mrs. Slosberg's dedication in this undertaking has been that of an avid collector, her generosity that of a true patroness of the arts.

The Helen S. Slosberg Collection of Oceanic Art In Memory of Her Brother Israel Sagoff began as a gracious impulse to contribute something of lasting artistic value and educational worth to Brandeis University. The choice of gift was determined by a fortuitous meeting of Mrs. Slosberg with the staff of the Rose Art Museum. Asked during that visit to appraise some recent gifts of African art, Mrs. Slosberg became aware of lacunae in the museum's holdings in primitive art. The realization sparked Mrs. Slosberg's imagination: she determined to fill the gaps.

Mrs. Slosberg's first concern was to acquire a primitive art collection of rare quality. She decided on Oceanic art both out of personal interest and to stimulate recognition of a field which, in the early 1960s, was relatively unrepresented in this country. The latter consideration made the proposed collection doubly valuable to Brandeis. In addition, with her characteristic foresight, Mrs. Slosberg realized that it could only be a matter of a few years before the acquisition of authentic Oceanic art became impracticable. Rigid export restrictions over art-producing areas and the absorption of primitive cultures by the West have proven her expectations correct.

The story of Mrs. Slosberg's acquisition of the Oceanic collection is a long and fascinating one. It includes several excursions to the South Seas, visits to galleries all over the world, and winter mornings on Boston's waterfront shepherding arrays of masks and carvings past bewildered customs officials. Behind the adventure lay an embracing love of art, an undaunted magnanimity, and an impressive amount of sheer work in arranging for the purchase, delivery, and installation of the art.

The Slosberg collection, now fully assembled, consists of some three-hundred fifty items from all parts of the South Pacific. Under custody of the Rose Art Museum, portions of the collection remain on permanent exhibition in Schwartz Hall, the center at Brandeis for studies in Anthropology. Here, the collection is maximally effective in fulfilling its educational purpose. We at the Rose Art Museum are pleased to present this catalog as a supplement to understanding and appreciating the collection. The catalog draws a general picture of Oceanic art and culture and fills the sketch with the colorful detail of selected individual objects. Works are included on the basis of their intrinsic merit as art, their diversity of function, and their geographic distribution.

The study of Oceanic art has developed as a systematic discipline only recently. In the 1940s, when the Museum of Modern Art in New York produced the first comprehensive exhibition of Oceanic art in this country, a mere handful of reliable studies on the subject was available. Most of these attempted to organize the raw material into broad style categories based on locale — like the Sepik River Area, New Guinea, or Arnhem Land in Australia. Subsequent studies have refined the initial attributions until, at the present level of knowledge, many works can be assigned to a particular tribe or village within the major category. In addition, recent work in the field has branched out from style differentiation to larger cultural issues, focusing on the role of art objects in a cultural context as well as on the meanings suggested by the treatment of various images.

Research, however, is still beset by numerous obstacles. Prime among them is the difficulty, in spite of adequate stylistic distinctions, in pinpointing the exact provenance of many works. Objects are frequently collected at central locations where they arrive via native trade or intervention by dealers. Information regarding origins of the works, if it exists at all, can be misrepresented in the course of these transactions. For the purposes of this catalog, we

have relied first on style for making attributions and only secondarily on the documentation, some of it contradictory, that was acquired with the art. Published research on other collections has proven invaluable in this endeavor. Still, despite every effort, I do not dismiss the possibility of error, and I welcome informed corrections.

The assignment of dates is a second problem in the identification of Oceanic works. It can be safely assumed that exposure and use substantially shorten the life of any authentic object, so that art recently collected in the South Seas must date — except in the most unusual cases — to the twentieth century. Beyond that, and without sophisticated scientific equipment at our disposal, we again rely on the eye to assign an approximate age to each work. The matter is complicated by the fact that Oceanic art is dedicated to a concept of tradition which precludes “stylistic development” in the sense we customarily mean. As far as we know, art in Oceania has looked much the same for centuries.

This catalog simply distinguishes between “old” and “modern” objects. “Old” signifies objects made prior to the Westernization of the South Seas cultures; “modern” are those made subsequently. This rudimentary division varies from place to place: for example, Polynesia, which was thoroughly colonized by the middle of the nineteenth century, no longer yields any old works; parts of the interior of New Guinea, on the other hand, remain to this day almost unspoiled by foreign intrusions. Unless otherwise noted, we consider that all works in the Slosberg collection are modern, with actual age varying according to area of origin.

Entries for individual works provide the following information: catalog number, generic name of the object, provenance as specifically as possible, a list of materials, the largest dimension of the object given in centimeters, and the Rose Art Museum accession number. I have concisely described each item emphasizing special

stylistic features, the meaning of the object in context, and relevant comparisons with other works in the collection. The present tense used throughout should be understood as the historic present.

Finally, I owe special thanks for assistance in this project to several individuals. I have already mentioned Mrs. Helen Slosberg’s enormous contribution. Without her perseverance and generosity, neither the collection nor the catalog could have taken shape. I am deeply grateful both professionally and personally to Dr. Carl Belz, Director of the Rose Art Museum, for the many hours of thought, guidance, and encouragement which he has given to this project. Words are inadequate to measure the quality of his inspiration. I would like to give thanks also to Barney Burstein for the outstanding photographs with which we proudly illustrate the publication; to Dennis Piechota of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University for conservation information; to Walter Soule, Superintendent of the Rose Art Museum, for his genuine interest in the art and for the many tasks he performed with a sense of humor which kept all problems in perspective; and special thanks to my husband for his insuperable support.

BBS



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## Introduction

### I.

The art of Oceania is as diverse and exotic as the lands which produce it. The art represents the deepest expressions of hundreds of tribes and millions of people. Its history stretches from the dark reaches of the Stone Age to the present day. Yet, only recently — within the past two or three decades — have Western art historians begun to consider this body of work as more than a tool for anthropological research or a curious permutation of handicraft. Only recently have we begun impartially to examine the puzzles surrounding the fabrication, the meaning, and the stylistic traditions of these strangely fascinating objects.

The purpose of this catalog is to provide specific information about a selection of objects from the Helen S. Slosberg collection as well as an introduction to the field of Oceanic art as a whole. Behind the endeavor lies the belief that an understanding of this art offers rich rewards in terms of both aesthetic pleasure and the expansion of cultural horizons. Too, a study of Oceanic art raises questions about the common conception of “primitive” art, which grasps the glaring oddities but misses the inherent human commonality suggested by the art. One comes to wonder whether the expressive principles which generate “primitive” art are in fact different in kind from those of “advanced” cultures. Everywhere the urge to abstract some vision of the higher aspirations of man and to wrest meaning from one’s surroundings remains constant. Finally, and not least importantly, there is an element of fun in Oceanic art, a real enjoyment in satisfying one’s curiosity about such unfamiliar objects as cannibal forks, or suspension hooks, or giant basketry masks.

### II.

The islands of Oceania straddle almost one-fifth of the earth’s surface from the coast of Southeast Asia eleven thousand miles across the Pacific Ocean to Easter Island.

Oceania subdivides into five geographic areas, of which the greatest in land mass is the continent of Australia in the southwestern Pacific. To the north of Australia lies Melanesia, consisting

of New Guinea and a string of smaller islands extending from the eastern shores of New Guinea to the New Hebrides. Polynesia, the largest sector of Oceania, forms an approximate triangle from New Zealand in the southwest to Easter Island to the Hawaiian Islands in the north.

The two smaller divisions of Oceania are Indonesia and Micronesia. Indonesia comprises the large islands off the coast of Southeast Asia, including Borneo and the Philippines. The tiny atolls of Micronesia lie scattered to the east of Indonesia.

The settlement of Oceania began more than 10,000 years ago when men and women first made their way to Australia during the Ice Age. Paleolithic tribes migrated via land bridges and shallow straits which at that time connected Australia to mainland Asia. The descendants of these first immigrants into Oceania are the Aborigines who have inhabited Australia ever since, virtually severed from outside contact. They have retained the technology of Stone Age man, hunting and gathering wherever nature allows.

The subsequent population of Oceania appears to have occurred in successive waves of immigrants, slowly moving out of Southeast Asia and dispersing toward the east. A first large-scale migration of Negroid peoples, perhaps linked originally to Africa, began trickling into Melanesia around 2000 B.C. Their culture, collectively called Papuan, was Neolithic in character and included, in addition to hunting, some domestication of plants and animals. Black-skinned peoples speaking Papuan languages still reside in areas of Melanesia (primarily in New Guinea) and, in fact, give the area its name — from the Greek “mela-” meaning black and “-nesos” meaning island.

In the first millenium B.C., a second flow of immigrants emerged from Southeast Asia. Light-skinned peoples speaking languages of the Austronesian family began pushing into Micronesia and Melanesia. Some remained and mingled with the Papuan inhabitants of Melanesia; others continued on to settle the Polynesian islands at

the beginning of the first century A.D. In order to traverse the vast expanses of water between Melanesia and the Polynesian islands, the latter people were obliged to develop ship-building and navigational techniques of a relatively advanced nature. It is also probable that further technological advances in Polynesia — such as the use of irrigation and metal implements and the consequent stabilization of agriculture — resulted from later contacts with Bronze Age culture in the Orient, via Indonesia.

After these initial migrations, the populations of Oceania remained more or less stable for centuries. Isolated by sea from the rest of the world, each island population adapted to its particular set of environmental factors — climate, food supply, proximity to forest or mountain or sea. Each developed the social and religious institutions necessary to strike a balance with natural laws. Aside from adjustments imposed by these conditions, the original cultures survived unperturbed until the modern period.

In 1513, Balboa's discovery of the “South Sea” opened the Oceanic realm to European eyes for the first time. At first gradual, the influx of Western explorers intensified until, with Captain Cook's three voyages in the 1770s, the great European colonial powers (Spanish, Dutch, British) had laid claim to nearly every territory in the South Pacific. The 19th century saw the material wealth of the islands depleted at a rate only slightly less alarming than the speed with which the cultural wealth was dissipated. Ritual objects fell victim to Christian missionaries whose task it was to obliterate “heathen” ways of life and belief. European traders carried off “souvenirs” by the hundreds with an acquisitiveness whose single merit (in retrospect) was to preserve some of the finest traditional works of art from the Oceanic cultures.

Western exploration and exploitation inevitably resulted in the breakdown of ancient ways of life. The idyllic, hospitable islands of Polynesia were the first and hardest hit, while the more formidable Melanesian islands were not disrupted until World War II when these areas became strategic military positions. As cultures suffered upheaval, the beliefs which had sustained meaning in the

arts were undermined. The traditional techniques and motifs disintegrated or were replaced by modern conventions without corollary understanding. In addition, the flourishing market for exotic artifacts stimulated production of art for the tourist trade rather than for sacred ritual.

A more profound problem arises here too: art objects in Oceania were once thought to embody spiritual power, but apparently they did so in ways which were not — and perhaps could not be — verbalized. As investigation from the outside expanded, tribe members were increasingly pressured to justify their myths and beliefs. The attempt to put into words what could not be explained rationally tended to strip many sacred beliefs of their real power. Symbols were particularized to make them comprehensible to the inquisitive Western mind. In the process, their indefinable essence was lost. This subtle, psychological change in the way art was seen naturally had its effects on the art itself. Even when the intent was to preserve sacred tradition, the result was often to relay grammar without syntax and sign without significance.

This is not to say that no new art of value has or will develop out of the changed situation. It does, however, differentiate between authentic or “old” objects — those produced before extensive contact with the West — and modern derivations from old objects. While old objects are the rarer, modern objects may be of considerable importance: they do inform us at least in a diagrammatic fashion about the original cultures, and, in areas where tradition survives relatively unscathed, they provide evidence of the ongoing expressive urge of the people who make them. Finally, this description of the degeneration of Oceanic cultures acknowledges that no research can ever fully reconstruct the deepest significance of Oceanic art. We remain on the outside looking in.

### III.

While Oceanic art is, as I have said, extraordinarily diversified over the range of cultures in the South Seas, we can point to certain shared precepts of a general nature against which the art may be viewed constructively. The most complex of these involves the integration, on several levels, of art with practical and spiritual life. The role of tradition is a second concept with sweeping implications for the art and culture of Oceania.

At a primitive level of technology, man is largely at the mercy of his environment. He lives where game is plentiful or where yams will grow. When the supply runs short or the earth dries up, he moves to more abundant lands. Weather is not a topic of polite conversation but a matter of life and death. Clothing and shelter are made from whatever materials nature supplies in readily accessible form — animal skin, bark, grasses. In the pursuit of survival, nothing can be taken for granted and nothing left to chance.

To achieve a sense of harmony with — or, in some cases, mastery over — nature’s forces, man relies on his own mental and spiritual constructs. Among Oceanic peoples, the powers which control the environment are seen as manifestations of spirits which are said to dwell in animals, plants, and other natural phenomena. Healthy crops, abundant rainfall, successful hunts all depend on the goodwill of these spirits. Because the spirits are too ineffable or too forbidding for direct human address, elaborate rituals are designed to establish contact between mortal and spirit. Ritual art plays a fundamental role. Masks, carvings, and fantastically polychromed ornaments transform a man or place from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Conversely, the representation of a crocodile or bird or tree draws some of its immanent power into a tangible, and therefore more accessible, form. Actual bones or feathers from a sacred animal may be incorporated into ritual objects to insure greater potency. In effect, art intercedes to secure from nature the needs of everyday life.

Ritual is, of course, more than a practical expedient; it feeds the spiritual life of the tribe as well. Sacred rites induce men to heroic deeds, initiate boys into adult responsibilities, sanction marriages, forestall evil spirits, and lay the dead to rest. From spectacular ceremonies for the re-enactment of creation myths to formal burial of the dead, the motivating force is to fit the inexplicable events of human life into a comprehensible order. Art, above all else, is order. It is tangible proof of man's ability to abstract, to visualize, to arrange one set of things into something else that did not exist before he made it. Ritual art objects, in a sense, are order itself; and as such, they acquire an extraordinary power in controlling the unknown. Frequently, the objects themselves are believed to contain such great power that the mere sight or touch of the object by the uninitiated will result in instant death.

Art's potency extends to the strictly utilitarian object as well. Even the most functional items, like bowls, shields, and clubs, are decorated with the same care and style as ritual objects. We can assume that the carry-over of motifs from ritual to utilitarian objects hopes to invest the latter with similarly beneficial powers — that is, to make food more plentiful, a shield more protective against enemy blows, or a club more deadly.

The concept of tradition in art which we find throughout Oceania may be best illuminated by a comparison with our essentially opposite attitude in the West. While the best of Western art has

always — at least since the Renaissance — sought to equal its heritage in quality, we have also placed a premium on the unique contribution of each individual artist. Oceanic art, on the other hand, is more a communal responsibility than a lone creative enterprise. And it is regulated by laws of tradition which command the recreation, as exactly as possible, of forms and motifs handed down from time immemorial.

In societies where little else is stable, tradition functions as psychological *terro firmo*. The traditional myths on which ritual art is based concern the origins of man. Most have a common basis: superhuman beings, the prototypes of modern man, roamed the world in ancient times and established life down to the last detail — the geography of the land, means of survival, family clans, customs, rituals and art. This task accomplished, the ancestral beings dissolved into spirit form to reside in "totems" — usually animals whose mystical force derives from their potential threat or benefit to humans. Each clan traces descent from one of these totems, inextricably linking man's self-image with his natural environment. Man's understanding of his world occurs through consultation with these ancestors, which can be carried out only through proper rituals, all of which are predetermined and none of which can be altered without endangering man's peaceful relations with the spirits. In a sense, then, life itself depends on faithful service to the established laws of tradition. The very basis of religious belief precludes change.

As in Oceania, art in the West has developed, in part, in response to religious belief, especially Christianity. The central symbol of the Christian religion is the child, Christ at his physical birth and at his spiritual rebirth — both the promise of a new beginning. Childhood and change are linked concepts: the human child is, in his continual self-discovery and growth, the very essence of change. In worshipping the child, Christianity presumes change as the fundamental condition of life; Western (Christian) art has evolved as a dynamic succession of unique, expressive impulses. Oceanic art also makes visible a system of belief, but Oceania looks back to the ineluctable commandments of its ancestors, and its art is as immutable as the earth.



#### IV.

The scope of this catalog is ambitious. In keeping with the intent of the collection, it attempts to cover both a wide geographic distribution and as great a range of different kinds of objects as possible. We have, however, concentrated our attention on Australia, Melanesia, and Polynesia. Art from these areas is both plentiful and fine. Within Melanesia, we have given special emphasis to the art of New Guinea. The island of New Guinea alone harbors nearly as many tribes with distinct art styles as are found in the whole remainder of Oceania. These styles fall into broader regional groupings with the Sepik River Area, the Massim and the Maprik Areas especially well-represented in our collection. Only by examining each region separately can we do justice to the art of this rich land. Australia and Polynesia, by contrast, encompass such minor stylistic variations that each is treated as a unit.

Examples of art from Micronesia are extremely rare in the West, and none are found in this collection. Indonesian art presents a different problem. The art produced there in the last few centuries is so strongly influenced by its ties with Asia that it may properly be designated as "Oriental" art and is, therefore, omitted from this survey.

The approach to the material in this catalog takes two parallel paths. We are concerned, first, with art from an aesthetic point of view. The objects are considered for their beauty, their formal arrangement, treatment of motif, means of execution, and expressive impact. However, as we have pointed out, it is impossible fully to appreciate Oceanic art without understanding the context in which it is made and used. Therefore, considerable weight has also been given to describing the function of each object within the fabric of society.

The art of Melanesia, Australia, and Polynesia falls into three loosely-defined stylistic categories. The work is bound, within each area, by certain family resemblances. We are concerned in these concluding remarks less with the interconnectedness between these three sets of traits than with the differences between them. The differences will help to clarify for the newcomer to Oceanic art some sense of provenance for the various objects as well as an overview of contrasting conditions of life from one area to another.

Native Australian art consists primarily of two types of object: paintings on bark, and carved wooden plaques of simple, abstract design. Sculpture surfaces are either painted with earth colors or shallowly incised, but, in either case, simple, repeated patterns of lines, dots, and spirals dominate. The motifs on bark paintings are similar; where they include representations of humans and animals, the forms are given a decidedly two-dimensional emphasis. Recognizable forms occur only occasionally in sculpture and are likewise presented with stress on surface design rather than three-dimensional volume.

Besides the obvious link between simple execution and a primitive level of technology, we might point to connections between art forms and a world view born of isolated roaming over vast, flat expanses of desert. Except for rare ceremonial gatherings, the only contact between bands of people are the marks (footprints, remains of campfires) left on the ground. One learns to read his environment like a map, piecing together meaning out of schematic, abstract patterns on the flat earth.

The rugged jungles of Melanesia yield a wholly different product. Wooden sculpture of fantastic variety abounds. Shapes are vigorously curvilinear in fully three-dimensional sculpture as well as in relief carving. The human figure is a constant inspiration, although always exaggerated in proportion for greater expressive power. Surfaces are frequently decorated in bright, contrasting polychrome, the painted patterns marked by a rhythmic, springing energy.

Though necessarily over-simplified, this description of general tendencies in Melanesian art suggests a correlation between the chosen art forms and the living conditions. In Melanesia, where headhunting and cannibalism have been the rule for centuries, where the jungle can be as threatening as it is nurturing, life depends on vigorous combat with enemy and environment alike. Anxiety is a constant. Art centers around secret men's cults; masks for transforming man into apparition are among the commonest, yet most dramatic, art forms. One imagines a pitched battle between man and the world around him, a battle in which emotion runs high and reaches climactic intensity in ritual ceremonies. The art with its distortion, its coiled energy and vivid coloration communicates hot emotion with a shiver down its spine.

The third family of stylistic traits are those of the Polynesian islands. The dominant medium for authentic Polynesian art is wood sculpture. Almost never painted, the surfaces are instead covered with intricate, geometric forms in low relief. Undecorated objects are cool and elegant in design. Representation of natural forms is relatively scarce but follows a similar inclination toward either spare economy or complex geometric abstraction. One responds to the art as well-ordered, self-contained, and highly reserved expression.

Traditional Polynesian culture is the most technologically advanced of the Oceanic societies and, as such, the only one able materially to support leisure time for a privileged class of chieftains. Much less fluid than its neighboring cultures, Polynesian society is strictly organized according to hierarchical distinctions of social rank, governed by extravagantly precise rules of etiquette. A separate class of priests forms part of the aristocracy, and, as this suggests, the gods in Polynesian religion are more formalized, abstract deities than the ancestor-spirits who lurk in the flora and fauna of Melanesia. A tightly controlled society based on abstract principles is accurately reflected in the terse geometry of the art.

Finally, we should note that, besides an acquaintance with the stylistic and cultural heritage of Oceania, to see the objects of this collection requires as well a leap of imagination. Their physical and psychological context is far from this display: against a backdrop of foliage or a desert horizon; surrounded by brightly painted dancers and pounding drums, or in a sacred hiding place where the initiate comes to sudden revelation; usually in motion, and, whether ritual or utilitarian object, always part of a greater whole.



AUSTRALIA



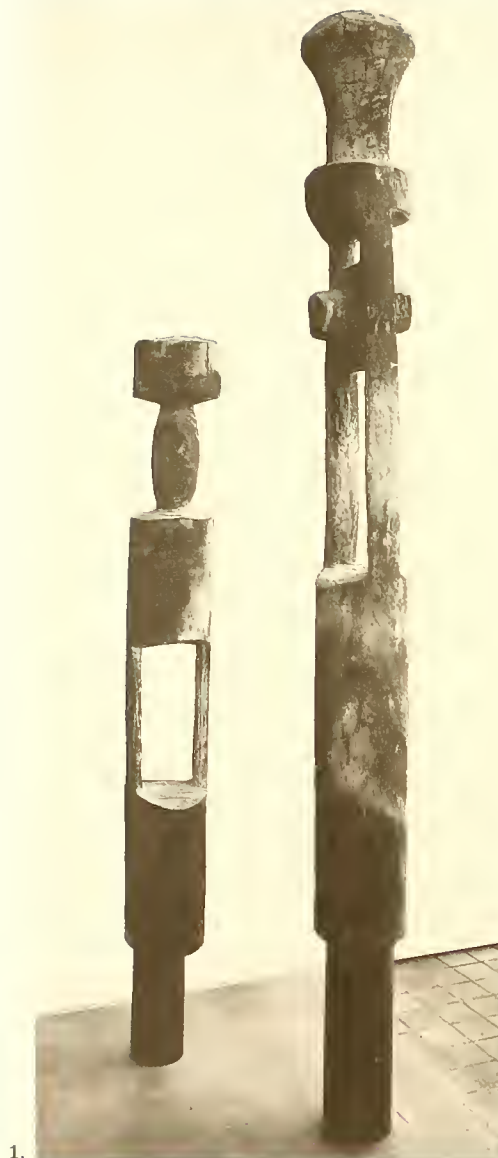
## Catalog Of The Collection

### I. Australia

Australia's native population consists of bands of Aborigines, who have descended from the original Stone Age settlers of the continent and who continue to roam the arid plateau of Kimberley in the northwest and the slightly richer coastal area of Arnhem Land in northern Australia much as their ancestors did. Despite the vast expanses of land which the Australian tribes inhabited before Western settlement, Aboriginal cultures are remarkably uniform over the entire continent. The Aborigines hunt and gather for sustenance. Their tools are simple stone and wooden implements; weaving is also practiced. The seasonal pursuit of food and water supplies requires a semi-nomadic way of life which supports only the most portable accoutrements. Therefore, art is either entirely transitory (ground painting, body adornment) or made to be discarded after an appropriate ceremony, like the large wooden mortuary posts which are burned or abandoned after services for the dead. A notable exception is the sacred tablet, the "churinga," treasured by each family clan as the symbolic dwelling place of its ancestral totem.

Aboriginal art is invariably linked with religious experience. Religion centers around the belief in immortal spirits who in ancient times — a period known as "the Dreaming" — took physical form in order to create the world and then retired again as the totem spirits inhabiting designated animals, plants, and other natural forms. Each clan traces its origins to one of these totems, which affirms in a spiritual way the dependence on nature which structures material life as well. Art functions as part of the Aborigines' sole attempt to bend nature to human purpose — through ritual offerings to the totem spirits to insure peace for the dead and prosperity for the living.





1.

## 1. Funerary Posts

Bathurst and Melville Islands.

Wood; traces of red pigment.

(a) Height: 183 cm.

1963.45

(b) Height: 305 cm.

1963.44

Tall, cylindrical, hardwood posts carved in abstracted approximations of human form; originally painted in geometric patterns, which have been erased by exposure to elements.

The only monumental sculpture in Aboriginal art, these posts are erected at the graves of deceased tribal members, both male and female, to pacify the departed spirits. After ceremonies to honor the family totem, graves are abandoned.

## 2. Churinga

Kimberley.

Human hair, stone and red pigment.

Length: 54.5 cm.

1961.189

Flat, slate tablet engraved on both sides with designs of spirals and parallel lines; covered with red ochre; cord of braided human hair.

The churinga is a sacred cult stone thought to house the spirit of the totem to which it is dedicated. The designs are schematized references to events in the lives of the ancestor-creators: spirals may represent the remains of campfires, parallel lines the traces left by stacks of dead game or enemies. Taken together, the signs stand for a particular mythological cycle. These stones are among the few art objects made to outlast a specific ritual.

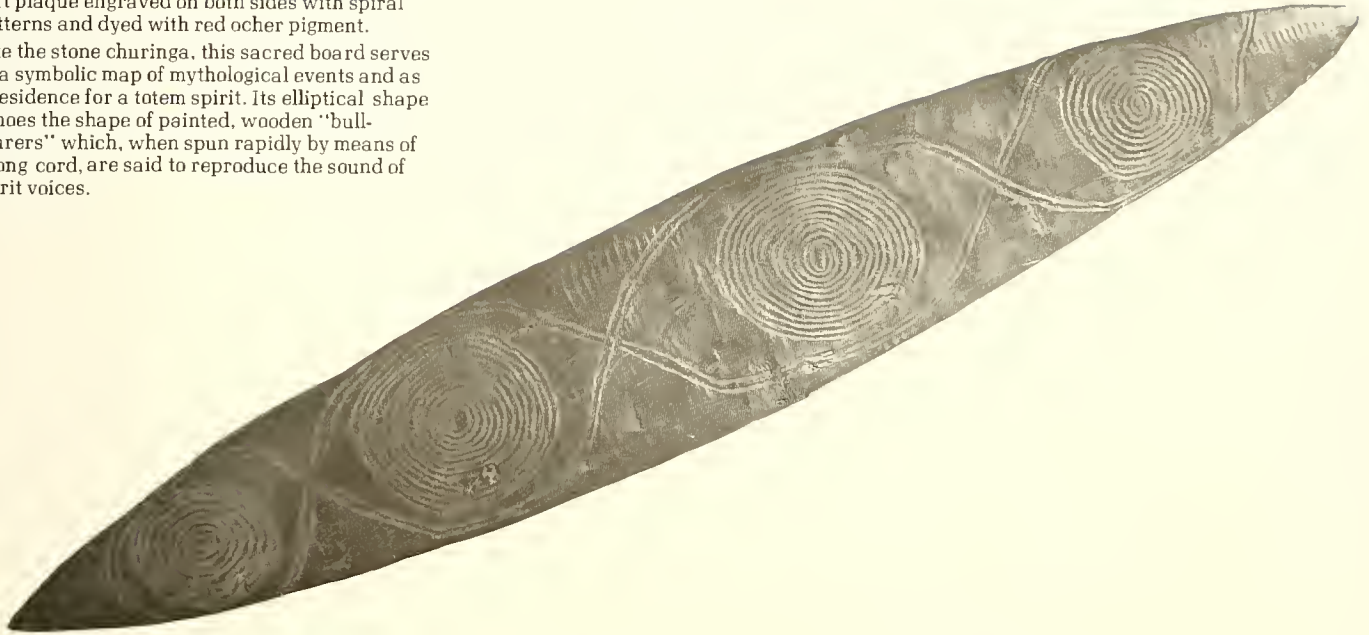
### 3. Churinga

Central Australia.  
Wood and red pigment.  
Length: 51.5 cm.

1960.68

Flat plaque engraved on both sides with spiral patterns and dyed with red ochre pigment.

Like the stone churinga, this sacred board serves as a symbolic map of mythological events and as a residence for a totem spirit. Its elliptical shape echoes the shape of painted, wooden "bull-roarers" which, when spun rapidly by means of a long cord, are said to reproduce the sound of spirit voices.



3.

### 4. Sacred Pendant

Kimberley.  
Shell and red pigment.  
Length: 18.5 cm.

1963.30

Oval, mother-of-pearl shell segment with labyrinthine design engraved and filled in with red pigment; perforation for attachment of suspension cord; chip broken from one end.

Like the engraving on churingas, these designs are symbolic of mythological events, probably representing the tracks left by itinerant creator figures. The pendants are worn during initiation.

### 5. Ancestor Figure

Arnhem Land.  
Wood; traces of red, black and white pigment.  
Height: 27 cm.

1961.33

Standing figure with a long, slightly swelling torso and hands clasped behind the back. Irregular striations include summarily rendered lizard on front.

This small figure is an old and very rare object; the placement of the hands is particularly unusual. By comparison with the modern example which follows, the shapeliness and detailing of the older work suggest both a firmer sense of realism and a surer handling of plastic volume.



#### 6. Ancestor Figure

Arnhem Land, Yirrkalla.  
Wood; red, yellow, black and white pigment.  
Height: 45.5 cm. 1961.165

Conventionalized human figure carved in three dimensions; painted with bright, geometric patterns; lizard outlined on both sides.

This and the previous figure, less imposing than the funerary posts of the neighboring Bathurst and Melville Islands (see #1), are used as grave markers in similar fashion. The lizard design on both works indicates that the deceased belonged to the lizard totem family. This piece is a strong, authentic work despite its modern date.

#### 7. Netted Bag

Victoria.  
Hemp; red, yellow and white dyes.  
Length: 67.5 cm. 1965.5

The art of weaving is practiced chiefly by women. This simple, striped design is one of many types of bag and basket made throughout Australia for transporting the few indispensable possessions which nomads carry.

#### 8. Parrying Shield

Victoria.  
Wood; red and white pigment.  
Height: 71 cm. 1961.29

Softwood shield with handle carved in back; grooves in zigzag pattern painted in alternate stripes.

Painted, softwood shields are commonly used in welcoming dances for strangers, in which the dancers proclaim their prowess in war.

#### 9. Parrying Shield

New South Wales.  
Wood and red pigment.  
Height: 79.5 cm. 1961.27

Bow-shaped parrying shield with narrow blade and handle carved from a single wedge of hardwood; chevron patterns incised on blade.

The hardwood shield is used in hand-to-hand combat both to deal and to defend against blows.

#### 10. Boomerang

New South Wales.  
Wood.  
Length: 67.5 cm. 1961.187

Flat, gracefully curved weapon with delicate incising of stylized plant forms.

The boomerang, common to most parts of Australia, takes two distinct forms. The non-returning boomerang, of which this is an example, is a long, slightly curved instrument which is hurled with great force at a prey or enemy. The returning boomerang is a smaller, lighter, deeply curved object thrown primarily for sport.

#### 11. Spear Points

Ord River.  
Glass.  
Average length: 10 cm. 1963.14.1-6

Spears are an indispensable hunting weapon for the Aborigines. Points were once fashioned exclusively of sharpened bone, shell or stone. Since the introduction of European glass into Australia, this material has increasingly been employed.



## 12. Bark Painting

Arnhem Land, Milingimbi.

Bark; red, yellow, white and black pigment.

Height: 107 cm.

1963.56

Bark paintings are made from soaked and flattened sheets of bark painted with combinations of the four available colors: red, yellow, white and black. The powdered pigments are bound with tree-sap, beeswax, or other organic substances. Coarse paintbrushes are made by chewing the ends of fibrous twigs.

Bark paintings are used in ritual; shelters of sheet bark may also be painted for decoration. The art is common only to northern Australia — Arnhem Land and its off-shore islands. According to information acquired with the work, this modern painting was executed by Lartjanja of the Amil tribe, an artist specializing in mythological scenes. The subject is a mythical dance celebrating the discovery of the Morning Star.

This and the following work represent one of the four major bark painting styles: an all-over striation of the surface articulated by a complex narrative scene and framed with a painted border. The strictly two-dimensional rendering and abstract geometric patterns can also be compared to sculptural decoration in Arnhem Land (see #6).

## 13. Bark Painting

Arnhem Land, Yirrkalla.

Bark; red, yellow, white and black pigment.

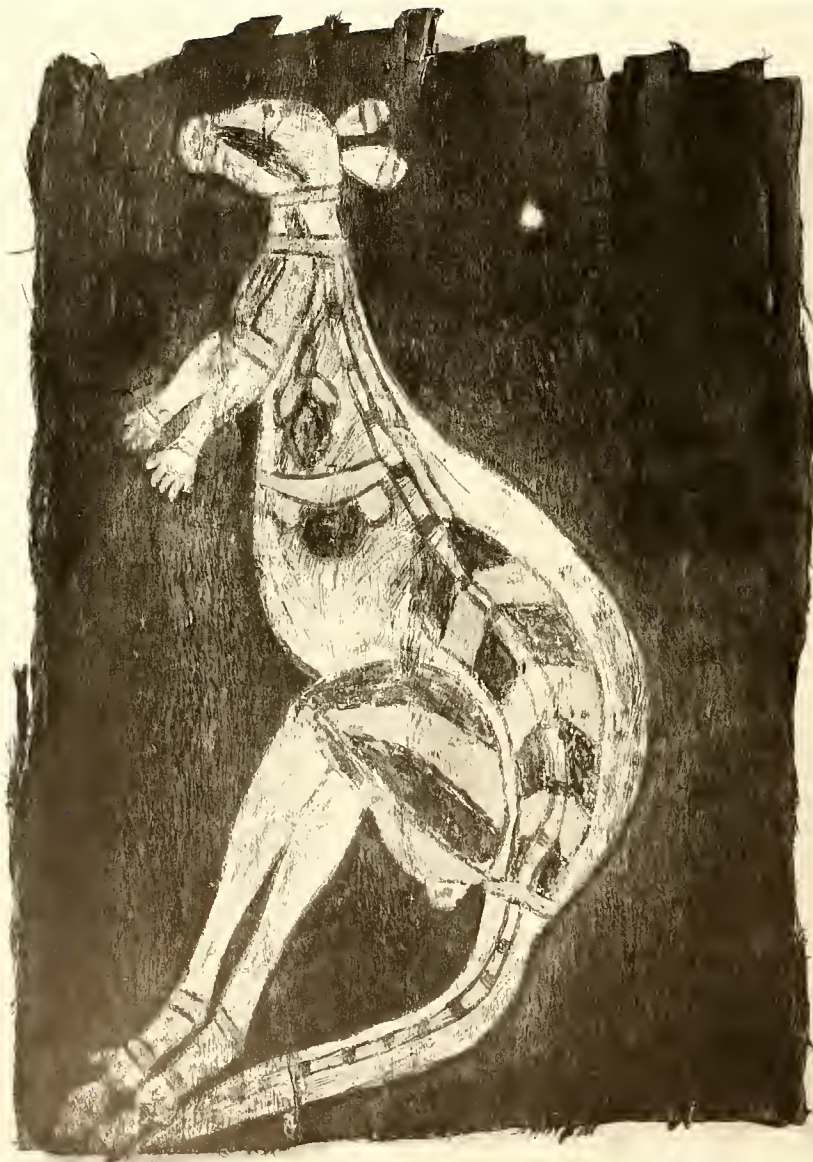
Height: 84 cm.

1962.13

Yirrkalla shares with Milingimbi an all-over style, except that the field is compartmentalized by a larger geometric grid which anchors representation to the surface. This painting features several mythological creatures, but the single scene conveys an entire legend to the initiated tribe member.



12.



#### 14. Bark Painting

Western Arnhem Land.

Bark; red, yellow, white and black pigment.

Height: 105.5 cm.

1963.49

The painting of Western Arnhem Land comprises a second major style division, especially renowned for the "X-ray" technique.

In this work, the kangaroo, an important totem, forms the single image on a plain ground. The animal is rendered in a two-dimensional, conventionalized manner, but the artist has included the spine and internal organs as though equipped with x-ray vision. The work suggests a pre-occupation with hidden essences beneath the readily apparent visual world.

#### 15. Bark Painting

Western Arnhem Land, Oenpelli.

Bark; red, white and black pigment.

Height: 71 cm.

1963.57

A similar treatment occurs in this work from the same area (see #14). A single, mythological creature with exaggerated antennae and genitals is drawn on a plain ground. While internal organs are minimized, the skeletal structure is emphasized both by the visible spine and ribcage and by the distinct markings at body joints such as wrists and knees.

#### 16. Bark Painting

Groote Eylandt, Gulf of Carpentaria.

Bark; red, yellow, white and black pigment.

Height: 95.5 cm.

1960.63

The third stylistic category represented in the collection is exemplified in this depiction of totemic fish and turtles. Dots and short lines fill the outline drawings, which are freely dispersed across a blank background with none of the sense of horror *vocui* present in the Milingimbi painting (see #12). The picture is enclosed by a sharply defined border of white and yellow lines.





## MELANESIA

## II. Melanesia

Melanesia encompasses an astonishing variety of geography, climate, culture, and art. We are concerned in this chapter with art from the crescent of islands to the northeast of New Guinea: the Pismarck Archipelago (including the Admiralty Islands, New Ireland, and New Britain), the Solomon Islands, the New Hebrides and the tiny Santa Cruz Islands in eastern Melanesia. New Guinea itself will be treated in a separate section. The Fiji Islands, while linguistically related to Melanesia, are more closely allied artistically with Polynesia and are included under that heading.

Settled by a racially mixed Neolithic population, the Melanesian islands host a more advanced technology than that of Australia. The chief distinction rests in the practice of agriculture in Melanesia, which leads to relatively stable settlements and a more complex material culture than nomadism permits. Permanent establishment is checked, however, by the primitive methods of crop rotation: staple crops, chiefly yams, are cultivated until the soil in one area is exhausted, whereupon whole villages move to fresh land. Vegetable crops are supplemented by hunting, gathering and fishing; in some areas, dogs, pigs and chickens have been domesticated and are highly prized. Nowhere has technology developed sufficiently to free a leisure class from the daily business of survival. Therefore, societies tend to be egalitarian, with rank conferred only by superiority.

Art in Melanesia ranges from bold, colorful masks and sculptures for sacred ritual occasions to articles of personal adornment to large-scale house decorations. Those art objects associated with ritual generally refer to totems, as in Australia, to reverence of the dead — often highly formalized ancestor worship — or to sorcery as a means of allaying nature's violence. Where religion centers are and secret men's societies, ritual headhunting and cannibalism, art tends to be more fiercely expressionistic than in those societies where sorcery is practiced communally to implement daily life.



### 17. Mask

New Hebrides, Malekula Island.

Clay, boar's tusks, cobweb, cane and cord; light red, black and white paints.

Height: 19.5 cm.

1961.22

Cane frame stuffed with cobweb and coated with clay modelled and painted to form human face; indented oval eyes and mouth, with boar's tusks inserted above mouth.

Malekula in the New Hebrides is the scene of some of the world's most frequent and violent natural dramas — typhoons, tidal waves, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. A system of strictly regulated, non-hereditary social grades imposes a semblance of order on the chaotic environment. Individuals increase rank through accumulation of wealth, and promotion is legitimized by ritual. Since one's prestige as an ancestor after death depends on achievement in life, motivation for social advancement is strong.

Certain art works are prescribed for each ritual advancement. This mask is probably a fragment of a four-sided mask with a face on each side and a tall, conical, cobweb headdress. After the ceremonial "killing" of lower grade statues, the mask is put on to signify the candidate's acceptance into the new grade. Boar's tusks are an indication of status, as pigs are the chief measure of wealth.

### 18. Tree-Fern Figure

New Hebrides, Ambrym.

Tree fern.

Height: 52 cm.

1971.712

Human figure with oval forms representing head, torso and legs; concave face with wide mouth, anchor-shaped nose and raised, cylindrical eyes.

The trunk of the tree fern yields a soft, spongy material which hardens with prolonged exposure to air. Use of the medium is restricted to Ambrym and the Banks Islands in the New Hebrides. Tree-fern figures are used in social grade rites and may also represent specific ancestors. Originally, this work would have been covered with a smooth layer of vegetable paste and polychromed. Fern-wood carvings are rare in Western collections.





### 19. Trophy Head

Solomon Islands.

Human skull, wood, clay, fiber and mother-of-pearl; black stain.

Height: 20.5 cm.

1960.60

Carved wooden face affixed to human skull; inlaid mother-of-pearl eyes and tattoo pattern; coiled fiber applied as hair. Inlay held in place with a putty of ground parinarium nuts.

Art from the central and eastern Solomon Islands differs in its relative restraint and realism from the vehemently expressionistic styles typical of Melanesia. Ritual is concentrated in communal celebrations of successful warfare, without the secret societies prevalent elsewhere.

The hunting of heads was traditionally a central preoccupation both for the personal prestige conferred upon the captor and for the communal enrichment afforded by the powerful spirits of the captive dead. Trophy heads were encased for preservation in wood and clay coverings of life-like proportions. The sharp contrast of black-stained wood and white inlay is characteristic of art in the central Solomons. This extremely fine work of art predates Westernization and is the pride of the collection.

## 20. Bowl

Solomon Islands.

Wood, mother-of-pearl and china; black stain.

Length: 107 cm. 1963.36

Deep elliptical bowl in shape of a bird with handles representing head and tail; mother-of-pearl and china inlay pattern of consecutive triangles on rim and handles.

Feast bowls in the shape of birds and fish are produced throughout the central and eastern islands. The bird may represent the albatross, once considered an important totem. The graceful profile of the bowl exemplifies concern for balanced but strongly plastic sculptural form.

## 21. Shield

Solomon Islands.

Wood and mother-of-pearl; black stain.

Height: 86.5 cm. 1965.24

Fluted, columnar shield of black wood with white inlay in floral and geometric patterns articulating the shape of the shield; handle carved in back.

War plays an important role in the struggle for survival among Melanesian peoples. Elaborately decorated shields are used in the Solomon Islands both in actual raids and in dances celebrating successful war expeditions.

## 22. Ceremonial Hand Club

Solomon Islands.

Wood and mother-of-pearl.

Length: 43.5 cm. 1967.7

Carved wooden crocodile with tail extended into gracefully rounded handle; pearl inlay on tail and handle.

A keen sense for observation from nature is expressed in this small carving; the scales and other surface markings are especially notable for their naturalism. Like the bowl (see #20), this work shows an affinity for rhythmic three-dimensional form. The crocodile bears formidable spiritual power in most of Melanesia.



### 23. Clubs

Solomon Islands.

(a) Wood, rattan, string and wire.  
Length: 50.5 cm. 1961.15.2

(b) Wood; black stain and lime.  
Length: 88.5 cm. 1961.15.4

(c) Wood and black stain.  
Length: 74.5 cm. 1961.15.1

These three hand clubs illustrate both the variety and the beauty of form applied even to deadly weapons. Balance, restraint in surface decoration, and assertive three-dimensionality are clearly valued aesthetic principles.

### 24. Fish Hooks

Solomon Islands.

Mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, string and beads.  
Average length: 7.5 cm. 1967.144.1-3

All of Melanesia's coastal peoples fish extensively to supplement their primarily vegetable diet with high-quality protein. Since edible land animals are scarce on most islands, food from the sea is valuable in trade with inland tribes as well. These spinning hooks are used for bonito fishing; towed behind canoes they simulate the movement of small fishes to lure the predatory bonito.

### 25. Ceremonial Club

Santa Cruz Islands.

Wood; red, black and white paint.  
Length: 86.5 cm. 1960.51

Canoe-shaped club with two triangular projections on top surface; repeated patterns of short lines, chevrons, triangles and other semi-geometric forms in black outline with interstices filled with red or white color.

In both the surface treatment and the sense of restraint in expression, art of the Santa Cruz Islands resembles that of the neighboring Solomon Islands. Here black wood and inlay are replaced by painted decoration, which produces both subtler contrasts of color and a more complex relationship between figuration and ground.



## 26. Dance Mask

New Britain, Gazelle Peninsula, Baining people.  
Bark cloth, cane and leaves; red and black dyes.  
Height: 132 cm. 1969.77

Mask in shape of imaginary animal-like face; features accentuated with black and red curvilinear designs. Tapa (tree bark beaten to gossamer thinness) is stretched over a cane frame, partially stuffed with leaves. See cover illustration.

The Baining people inhabit New Britain's largely unexplored, volcanic interior. Fantastic masks are the only major art form of the semi-nomadic Baining tribe and are worn in dances to embody supernatural protective forces, especially connected with the safety of children.

## 27. Funerary Cape

New Britain, Sulka people.  
Bark cloth; red, yellow, blue, black and white pigments.  
Length: 140 cm. 1965.3

Irregular triangle of bark cloth painted with a symmetrical pattern of hooks forming an abstracted human figure in the center.

Funeral ritual among the Sulka people on New Britain's southeast coast includes a procession of masked performers who carry the body on a bamboo stretcher to the burial site. Painted tapa capes are worn by the processional group; similar cloths cover the corpse.



### 28. Winding Cloth

New Britain, Sulka people.

Bark cloth; yellow, brown and black dyes.

Length: 764.5 cm. 1965.12

The practice of wrapping the body of the deceased in a winding cloth before burial is reminiscent of the same custom in Western tradition. The long strip of bark cloth is decorated with simple, repeated patterns of rectangles and chevrons.

### 29. Death Mask

New Britain, Sulka people.

Cane, bark cloth, dried grasses and leaves; light orange, pale yellow, brown, white and black pigments.

Height: 30.5 cm. 1965.61

Inverted triangle of bark cloth fastened to a cane frame and stuffed with grass and leaves; the mask is polychromed to represent a conventionalized human face.

Masks worn by Sulka funeral attendants are intended to transform the men into appropriately supernatural apparitions to deliver the dead into the realm of spirits. Members of the funeral procession also carry tall polychromed and feathered wands, which, with the masks and bark cloth capes (see #27), create a colorful spectacle.

### 30. Malanggan

New Ireland.

Wood and operculum; red, black and white pigments.

Height: 114.5 cm. 1963.19

Softwood carving of supernatural face; eyes inlaid with green and white operculum shell; sculpture polychromed in geometric and feather patterns. Towering headdress includes long ears symbolizing the flying fox totem and semi-detached poles with feathered edges.

The term "malanggan" means "carving" and is applied to a variety of wooden sculptures made in northwestern New Ireland for ritual and decorative purposes. The typical malanggan is a brilliantly polychromed openwork carving; additional segments are often socketed to the wooden core. This example is a portion of a larger vertical malanggan which would have featured several superimposed, interlocked figures and animals. The jutting brow, protruding, oval eyes, and mouth with exposed teeth give the face a latent ferocity in tension with the highly controlled craftsmanship.

Formerly, malangans were fashioned in secret, walled enclosures in preparation for their dramatic unveiling during festivals which re-enacted the complex mythological events of creation. Birds, fish, and other animals depicted in the malangans were considered totem ancestors of family clans, and each clan owned a "copyright" governing reproduction of its traditional totem motifs. Before the advent of the European market, malangans were burned after the rituals.

### 31. Friction Drum

New Ireland.

Wood.

Length: 63.5 cm. 1968.24

Hollow, oval instrument with three hooked prongs forming a sounding board, which has been polished smooth with use.

The friction drum is unique to New Ireland. The musician holds the instrument between his knees and draws resin-covered fingers over the sounding board; the friction produces a deep, vibrant murmur associated with spirit voices. Formerly, supernatural faces were carved on the drums.

### 32. Spear Point

Admiralty Islands.

Wood, obsidian and cord; red, black and white pigments.

Length: 45 cm.

1960.56

Spearhead of fully rounded male figure tipped with a large flake of obsidian; figure decorated with black and white geometric designs in low relief on a red ocher ground.

Art among the several peoples of the Admiralty Islands is uniform in style and medium due to extensive trade between the coastal fishing tribes and the inland agriculturalists. The zig zag and cross are common motifs and may represent scarification marks on this figure. Slightly flexed knees give the otherwise rigid figure a sense of inner dynamism. Carved spearheads with obsidian tips are unique to the Admiralty Islands.



### 33. Lime Spatula

Admiralty Islands.

Wood.

Length: 40.5 cm.

1960.57

Long, narrow spatula surmounted by a four-faced pedestal and a stalwart male figure with deeply bent knees.

The habit of chewing a mixture of a reca palm nut, betel pepper, and powdered lime for the mild narcotic effect it produces is common throughout Melanesia. The cult has yielded a class of decorative ritual objects, like this spatula, used to lift small quantities of lime to the mouth. The curious step motif on the pedestal beneath the typically diminutive figure corresponds to the design of actual step ladders in the Admiralty Islands.





NEW GUINEA



### III. New Guinea

New Guinea is the second largest island in the world. Circled by some 4,000 miles of coastline, the land gradually rises through dense jungle swamps, river valleys and highland plains to crest in the rugged, snow-capped Star Mountains of the interior. More than 700 culturally distinct tribes, primarily of Papuan stock, survive tropical climate and tribal warfare in semi-permanent agricultural and fishing settlements. Art production is concentrated on the coasts and in the vast Sepik River region, where local art styles are as numerous as distinct tribes. The central highlands of New Guinea, which separate the Sepik River and the Papuan Gulf regions, hold the last outposts of primitive civilization yet to be contacted by the West.

Communally maintained but exclusively male "spirit houses," and the activities associated with them, form the core of New Guinean ritual life. All of the major cult objects, such as masks and effigies, are stored in the spirit houses; initiation, funeral and headhunting ceremonies begin and end there; and there adult males keep company with the spirits of their human and totem ancestors. Finally, the structures themselves are equipped by each clan with monumental carvings and richly painted architectural members, which make them the visual as well as spiritual center of each community.



### 34. Necklaces

New Guinea.

(a) Shell segments, braided cord, beads and seeds.

Length: 54 cm. 1960.71.2

(b) Dog's teeth, shells, cord and blue glass bead.

Length: 40.5 cm. 1963.31

Articles of personal adornment make up a principal share of the small-scale art produced in New Guinea. Endlessly varied combinations of colorful shells, teeth, bones, feathers, seeds, and more recently, glass and plastic beads result in objects which accurately reflect the expressionistic tendencies in New Guinea art as a whole. Since shells are used in many areas as the chief medium of exchange, shell necklaces may double as decoration and as a show of wealth.



34.

### 35. Plate

Northern coast, Arapesh people.

Wood and black pigment.

Width: 41 cm.

1967.9

Round platter with two rows of raised knobs on the exterior rim to serve as handles; the spare decoration includes a circular meander pattern in the center symmetrically flanked by arms terminating in stylized faces.

The Arapesh-speaking people live in the dank, inhospitable Prince Alexander Mountains north of the Sepik River. Their attractive, carved food bowls also serve as symbolic messages of goodwill when exchanged with neighboring clans.

### 36. Sago Spoon

Northeast coast, Huon Gulf.

Wood and lime.

Length: 73.5 cm.

1960.53

Large ladle with a carved head uniting bowl and handle; incised and whitened patterns at handle's end.

The distinctive Huon Gulf facial type appears in this work: a narrow, elongated face with triangular patches around the eyes, a tall headdress and extended ear lobes. The spoon is used to ladle preparations of sago, the principal starchy food of large portions of New Guinea's population.



### 37. Ceremonial Axe

Central Highlands.

Shale, wood and rattan binding.

Length: 67.5 cm.

1961.23

Gray shale blade inserted in wooden haft and lashed with decoratively woven rattan.

Axes, shields and lavish body ornamentation are the major outlets for aesthetic expression in New Guinea's remote but densely populated central highlands. Magnificently shaped axes of this type are carried in ritual war dances.

### 38. Shield

Central Highlands.

Wood and cane; light red, gray and black paint with traces of blue.

Height: 157 cm.

1966.23.a-c

Flat, oblong shield with attached wooden handle and numerous surface perforations for applied decoration; polychromed in uneven horizontal bands of zigzags.

Shields rank as the only monumental art form of the warlike highland tribes; the objects combine utility with ritual significance.

### 39. Mask

Papuan Gulf, Elema people.

Bark cloth, cane and feathers; black and white pigment.

Height: 62 cm.

1963.23

Conical cane frame covered by bark cloth decorated with spirals and rows of contrasting triangles; feather fringe attached.

The swamps, deltas and islands of the Papuan Gulf on New Guinea's south coast are second to none in quality of art production. Conical masks are worn by young Elema boys in initiation festivities. Intended to be half-comical, half-frightening, the masks personify spirits of the bush.

Papuan Gulf art is quintessentially two-dimensional, featuring symmetrical surface designs of triangles, chevrons and loose, calligraphic loops, as in this example. Thin strips of cane are sewn to the bark cloth to outline each shape for both clarity of design and strong surface emphasis.

### 40. Mask

Papuan Gulf, Elema people.

Bark cloth and cane; red, black and white pigment.

Height: 101 cm.

1962.18

Oval mask of bark cloth on a cane frame with a projecting beak for a mouth; outlined and painted triangles, spirals and circles complete the face.

The Elema live along the fertile east coast of the gulf in villages dominated by towering, peaked ceremonial houses. Each house passes through a cycle of ritual lasting ten to twenty years before the structure is abandoned. Highly ritualized mask-making accompanies every phase of the cycle. The oval mask is especially important in inaugural ceremonies. Designs on the masks are governed by the birthrights of each clan. This example is of accomplished workmanship, though modern in date.

### 41. Ancestor Tablet

Papuan Gulf, Wapo-Era-Urama region.

Wood; red, black and white paint.

Height: 60.5 cm.

1965.58

Elongated oval board with a handle-like projection at lower end; abstracted, circular face in the center bordered by chevrons.

Ancestor tablets (called "gope") are common to all Papuan Gulf societies. Tribes of the Wapo and Era Rivers fashion grand displays of tablets and enemy skulls along the inside walls of their spirit houses. The boards, which usually incorporate an abridged human form, house powerful ancestor spirits.



40.

#### 42. Smoking Pipe

Papuan Gulf.  
Bamboo.

Length: 55 cm. 1961.180

This tobacco pipe, incised with target and wave patterns, works like a filter to cool smoke as it is inhaled through the length of bamboo. Tobacco is common throughout New Guinea and may have been known before European contact.

#### 43. Arrows

Southern coast, Torres Straits.  
Wood and string; black stain and lime.

Average length: 142 cm. 1961.24.1-3

Long, sharply pointed weapons incised between the shaft and head with abstract patterns filled with white lime.

The islands of the Torres Straits lie between the southern coast of New Guinea and the northern tip of Australia. Although most large-scale art forms in this area have disappeared, carved arrows for use in trade, war, and ceremony are plentiful. The carvings at one time represented realistic human figures and crocodiles but have evolved in recent years to simplified, abstract patterns.

#### 44. Canoe Prow Ornament

Southern coast, Asmat people.  
Wood; traces of red pigment.

Length: 125.5 cm. 1964.32

Composite openwork carving of a hornbill bird and vigorously curvilinear, stylized shapes representing body parts of additional creatures; surface carving filled with red pigment.

On the southwest coast of New Guinea lie the vast mangrove swamplands inhabited by the Asmat people. The watery terrain makes the canoe a vital means of transportation for warfare as well as for hunting, fishing, and the gathering of wild sago, the staple food in this largely unarable land. Ritual headhunting among the Asmat is perpetuated by two fundamental beliefs: that each boy's initiation into adulthood must be sponsored by the captor of a new head; and that every death is caused by enemy sorcery and must be avenged in kind. Cannibalism is practiced for the grim purpose of transferring the victim's spiritual power to his executioner.

The canoe is central to Asmat symbolism, which links food, death, headhunting, and sex in an extraordinarily complex web of meanings. As a comparatively simple example, the hornbill bird, depicted here, feeds on sago fruit, symbolic of the human head. The bird then comes to represent the headhunter and rides the prow of the war canoe in headhunting raids. These, in turn, are seen as retaliation for deaths, as a means to refurbish the adult population with initiated youths, and as a symbol for man's sexual transactions with women. The networks of interlocked, abstracted, and abbreviated forms characteristic of Asmat art convey a similar complexity in visual terms.

## Maprik Region, New Guinea

The Abelam people occupy the fertile valleys of the Maprik region some 40 to 50 miles north of the Sepik River. Their gaily decorated art centers around ancestor worship and the yam cult. Ancestors — both human and mythological — are commemorated in the tiers of brightly painted faces and figures which adorn the towering, peaked facade of the Abelam cult house. Yams are both the principal food source and the focus of ritual life. Celebrations of the harvest include festivals in which gigantic yams up to sixteen feet in length, thought to be invested with nurturing spirits, are erected in front of the men's house. For the occasion, the tubers are masked and dressed as outlandish anthropomorphic beings to affirm the kinship between man and the yam spirits. Prestige is bestowed on the grower of the largest yam, whose size is carefully tallied each year.

The act of painting is also a significant aspect of Abelam ritual. Men gather under strict rules of fasting and abstention from women in order to paint ritual objects. Work proceeds communally: the highest ranking man paints white outlines; colored areas are filled in by lesser artists. The Abelam associate certain magical properties with paint itself, as evidenced by the practice of washing pigment from ritual masks and burying it in yam gardens to enhance fertility.





45.

#### 45. House Lintel Frieze

Maprik region, Abelam people.  
Wood; red, yellow, black and white pigment.  
Length: 158 cm. 1966.26

Three convex oval faces in horizontal arrangement; painted decoration includes small, closely set features and patterns of lines and dots representing hair and ornaments.

The Abelam spirit house is a monumental structure with a triangular ground plan and facade. The upper portion of the facade is covered with bark paintings of generalized clan spirits. Painted relief carvings of conventionalized faces, such as these, are attached below. Though not intended as likenesses, the faces are named for particular forefathers. The difference in medium is significant: distant, mythological clan spirits are rendered in the purely visual medium of paint, while spirits of actual human forebears are represented in the physical substance of sculpture.

#### 46. House Plaque

Maprik region, Abelam people.  
Wood; red, yellow, white and black paint.  
Height: 171.5 cm. 1961.21

Polychromed relief carving of a standing male figure; head, torso, and limbs are bulging, ovoid shapes painted with lozenges, dots and lines over areas of solid color.

This ancestor plaque, kept inside the spirit house, is of the traditional vertical figure type, more important ritually than figures represented in the recently adopted squatting position. The four-color polychrome is also traditional. The importance of paint itself is revealed in the elaboration of painted detail in contrast with the simple, almost casual, sculptural treatment. In addition, the Abelam ceremonially re-paint valued objects as a means of refreshing their spiritual significance; recent re-painting may account for the good condition of the color in this work.

#### 47. Mouth Pendant

Maprik region, Abelam people.  
Woven fiber, boar's tusks, shells and feathers;  
red, yellow and black pigment.  
Length: 51 cm. 1971.716

This composite ornament appears to represent a schematized human figure, outlined in white nassa shells, with a ridged nose and headdress of boar's tusks. It is held between the teeth by a string during dance performances.

#### 48. Yam Mask

Maprik region, Abelam people.

Rattan and vegetable paste; red, yellow, black and white pigment.

Height: 26 cm.

1961.28

Rounded basketry mask with projecting ears, nose and mouth; face outlined in cane and coated with polychromed vegetable paste; crowned with openwork tiara.

Masks of this type are worn along with costumes of colorful fruits, leaves and feathers during one of the eight ceremonies required to initiate youths into the yam cult. Masks worn by yams are similar in design but usually flat in section.



#### 49. Suspension Hook

Maprik region, Abelam people.

Wood; red, yellow, black and white pigment.

Height: 156 cm.

1964.29

Standing female figure carved in the round with a hornbill bird attached to the head and a hook extending from the feet. Body dominantly red with yellow face, and surface detail picked out in black and white.

Suspension hooks are widely used in spirit houses for hanging valuable possessions from the rafters out of the reach of rats. Hooks in human form represent clan ancestors; the hornbill signifies totemic ancestry. According to Abelam belief, female ancestors created vegetation and originally discovered the yam spirits. Female figures are also found on cult house facades, and the timing of yam rituals is determined by the moon, also considered female.

This figure is taller and more slender than the typically rotund Abelam sculpture; it probably comes from southern Maprik where influences from Sepik River art (see #52) would account for the stylistic variation.

#### 50. Hornbill Bird

Maprik region, Abelam people.

Wood; red, yellow, blue, black and white paint.

Height: 59.5 cm.

1963.11

Colorfully painted bird plaque of simple but energetic profile; radiating zigzag patterns on both sides.

Representations of clan totems were kept in the men's house or were attached to the house facade. The pattern on the body stands for the moon, symbol of natural (female) creativity. In addition to the four traditional colors, European laundry blue is used here.



## Sepik River Region, New Guinea

From its source in New Guinea's central mountain ranges to the swampy, lowland delta on the northeast coast, the Sepik River traverses the most extraordinary art-producing region in Oceania. The rich variety of wood carvings, masks, musical instruments, and liberally decorated utilitarian objects attests to an abundant material culture. In addition, ritual art is fundamental to the lively ceremonial practices of the Sepik peoples. As elsewhere in New Guinea, the men's spirit house is the nucleus of spiritual life and ancestor worship the dominant religious force. Initiation into cult secrets — often accompanied by cruelly painful rites — is prerequisite to male adulthood. Ritual headhunting and cannibalism meant as re-enactments of creation myths were universal before Western intervention.

Life along the Sepik is wholly responsive to the river. The people are economically dependent on the Sepik and its tributaries for food, irrigation, trade and transportation. Villages cluster along the banks of the river; houses stand on stilts in constant readiness for the yearly floods. The Sepik tribes also maintain deep respect for the river's supernatural powers. The crocodile is among the most potent of the river spirits and bears totemic significance, as do certain fish and indigenous birds like the cockatoo and cassowary.

Art styles of the Sepik epitomize the expressionistic curvilinear handling typical of New Guinea. Within the larger region, four closely related sub-regions, corresponding to geographic shifts in the river's course, can be defined. The Middle Sepik district, consisting of the lowland rain forests between the interior and the coastal mountain ranges, is the most productive of the art regions and the best represented in this collection. Influence exerted by powerful Middle Sepik tribes like the Iatmul extends to the Upper and the Lower Sepik districts — two less populous highland regions to the west and east, respectively. Art from the swamps and plains in the Sepik delta forms a fourth stylistic category. While numerous local styles can be differentiated, art of the Sepik region as a whole is relatively homogeneous due to easy intertribal communications afforded by the river.

### 51. Mask

Coastal region, Murik people.

Wood.

Height: 44.5 cm.

1960.49

Delicately carved, elliptical mask with sharp, beaked nose and closely set features offsetting the high forehead; curvilinear designs in low relief at top and bottom. A vertical ridge bisects the mask to emphasize its perfect bilateral symmetry.

This austere mask exemplifies the well-known "beak style," so named for the prominent nose which resembles a bird's beak. In the Murik version of the beak style, the nose curls in on itself at the tip; the median line and the outline uniting eyes and nose are also typical of the area. Masks of this type are attached to a hood of sacking (by means of perforations on the rim of the mask) and worn in dances to impersonate spirits.

### 52. Ancestor Figure

Coastal region, Ramu River valley.

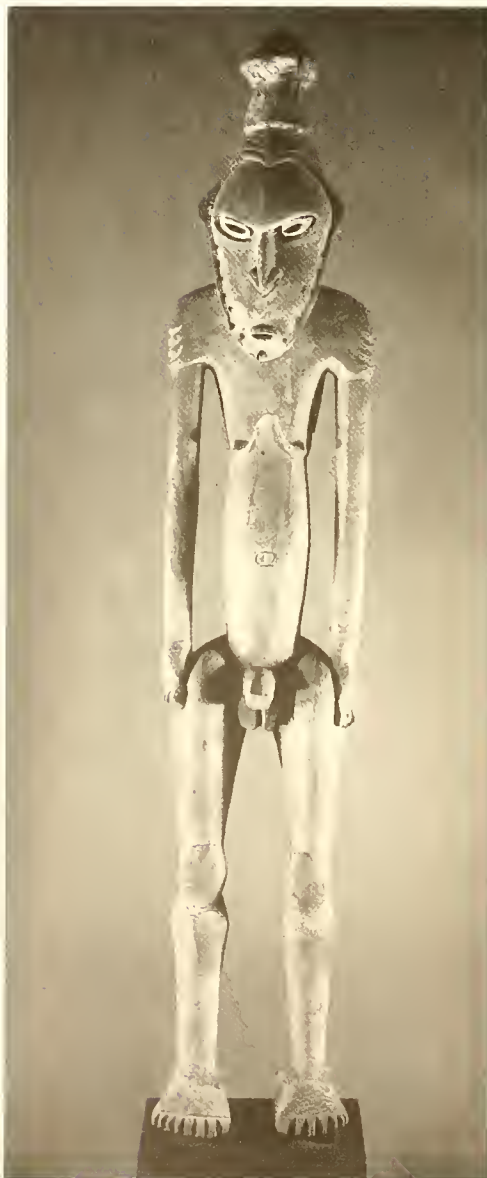
Wood; traces of red, yellow, black and white pigment.

Height: 124 cm.

1964.28

Fully round, standing male figure with a large head thrust forward in front of the chest and rigid, angular limbs. Perforations around the face originally held a fiber beard, and the sculpture's surface was polychromed.

Large figures of this type, presumably invested with ancestor spirits, are kept in the men's spirit house and used in ceremonies preparatory to war and hunting expeditions. The facial type — slanting, oval eyes joined to a beaked nose, the high forehead and tiny mouth — is a local variant of the coastal beak style. The artist suggests in the cramped and introverted yet latently powerful stance of the figure a sense of profoundly experienced tension between the spiritual and the physical.



### 53. Ancestor Figure

Coastal region.

Wood and dried grass.

Height: 45 cm.

1960.44

This small, wooden figure with a beaked nose and conical, fiber headdress typifies another modification of the prevalent coastal style (see #51). Works of this type continue to be produced widely for the market.

### 54. Slit Drum

Coastal region, eastern area.

Wood and traces of red pigment.

Length: 60 cm.

1960.156

Cylindrical drum carved from a single log hollowed out through a narrow, lengthwise slit; bands of ornamental, low-relief carving on body of drum. Finials at either end are composite beaked masks and animal forms.

The slit drum, common to all of New Guinea, is laid horizontally on the ground and beaten with a wooden pounder as an accompaniment to dances and as a means of sending messages. The reverberation is thought to be the sound of spirit voices. Drums played a major role in creation myths: the creator spirits carved human beings from wood, then beat drums and danced until the wooden figures were sparked to life.

### 55. Ceremonial House Post

Coastal region, Manam Island area.

Wood.

Height: 64 cm.

1961.26

Five faces are superimposed to form a short post, which terminates at the lower end in a simplified human figure and at the top in the typical conical headdress; a somewhat fleshier variation on the beak style occurs in these ancestral faces for display on a men's spirit house.

52.



#### 56. Bark Painting

Lower Sepik region, Keram River, Kambot people.  
Bark; brick red, black and white pigments.  
Height: 132 cm. 1963.53

Depiction of a standing male figure with bulging bodily proportions and the head of a bird; figure painted in the ubiquitous red and black pigments on white ground.

Like the Abelam people, the Kambot decorate the gables of their cult houses with bark paintings of clan ancestors. This heraldic image announces the clan's totemic kinship with the bird (possibly a cassowary); ornaments and scarification patterns also identify the clan. The swelling curves of this figure, which seem barely contained by the picture's edges, point to an aggressive physicality. By contrast, the Australian painting (see #15) of a small, linear, semi-transparent creature floating in the picture space seems frail and illusory.

#### 57. War Shield

Lower Sepik region, Yuat River, Anggoram people.  
Wood and raffia; yellow, black and white paint.  
Height: 178 cm. 1965.6

Tall, convex, rectangular shield with a peg at the top for addition of decorative materials; vertical row of five faces connected by sawtooth and spiral designs; raffia tassels tied to each nose and to sides of shield.

The faces represent supernatural, protective spirits whose success depends at least partially on terrifying the enemy. Anggoram art styles are closely allied to those of the Middle Sepik.

#### 58. Gable Mask

Middle Sepik, probably Blackwater River.  
Cane, rattan, feathers, teeth and vegetable paste; red, black and white pigments.  
Height: 137 cm. 1964.182

Huge, concave basketry mask showing a face with circular eyes trimmed with feathers, a ridged nose and ears, and an open mouth lined with teeth; face painted in alternately striped concentric rings over vegetable paste base.

The Blackwater River is a southern tributary of the Sepik; its art remains distinct from the dominant styles in the heart of the district. Gable masks characteristically embellish the men's house facade in the Middle and Upper Sepik regions. This mask probably personifies the spirit of the house itself, rather than any particular ancestor, and functions as a powerful injunction against both natural disasters and human insubordination. (This principle is not unlike the Christian practice of depicting the Last Judgement on the portals of cathedrals.)

#### 59. House Post

Middle Sepik, probably Blackwater River.  
Wood and conus shells; traces of red, black and white paint.  
Height: 203 cm. 1963.46

Post carved as a face with inverted teardrop eyes and a series of flat, overlapping ovals descending from the mouth; face surrounded by decorative motifs in low relief.

Every clan in the typical Middle Sepik village supplies a share of the building materials for the communal house; each clan is responsible for its own compartment inside the house. Richly carved architectural members identify and remain the nominal property of each contributor. This structural upright doubles as an image of one of the mythical clan spirits. Simple forms and the repeated oval pattern are characteristic of the Blackwater River area.





#### 60. Flute Ornament

Middle Sepik, probably Blackwater River.  
Bamboo, wood, reed, boar's tusks and fiber;  
black stain.

Length: 50 cm. 1961.183

Carved and blackened face with descending oval motif (see #59), braided fiber, and boar's tusks bound to the top of a bamboo flute.

Stoppers for bamboo flutes encompass a wide range of subjects and materials, often representing totem or creator spirits. Flutes are always played in pairs; the music reproduces supernatural voices.

#### 61. Flute with Effigy Stopper

Middle Sepik.  
Bamboo, wood, reeds, cowrie shells, string and rags; red, black and white paint.

Length: 90.5 cm. 1966.30.a-d

Bamboo flute topped with a wooden head polychromed in curvilinear patterns; miscellaneous items attached as decoration.

While this flute is of recent manufacture, it illustrates a traditional type of instrument with a magical effigy for a stopper. The flute has one hole below the stopper which sounds a single note to which the paired instrument responds. The polychromy is typical of the dominant Middle Sepik style, as compared with the simplicity of the previous example.

#### 62. Crocodile

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.  
Wood.

Length: 105 cm. 1969.72

Crocodile on a flat, oblong plaque carved with bands of zigzags, meanders and circles, which echo patterns in the scales of the naturalistically rendered animal.

The powerful Iatmul tribe dominates the central Sepik basin both artistically and economically. Their art is passionate, abundant, and lavishly decorative. The crocodile is a central sacred image. War canoe prows almost invariably represent the crocodile for its obvious associations with ferocity and stealth in river hunting. While the specific use of this object is not known, the iconographic motif of the snake (visible directly beneath the crocodile) refers to the belief that a mythical woman gave birth to a snake whose slithering passage to the sea created the channel of the Sepik River.

#### 63. Ancestor Relic

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.  
Human skull, human hair, clay and shells; red and white pigment.

Height: 23 cm. 1960.50

Human head modelled in clay over skull, which has been stripped of flesh; conus shell eyes, coiled human hair, shell headband, and traces of pigment in life-like war paint patterns.

This haunting portrayal of a deceased relative preserves not only the man's skull but his actual appearance as well. The Iatmul impale portrait heads of both relatives and headhunting victims on spiked stands in their spirit houses. The heads are considered to have extraordinary powers and may be consulted like oracles.

62.



65.

#### 64. Imitation Trophy Head

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.  
Clay, bone, cassowary feathers, wood and shell;  
red, white and black paint.

Height: 40.5 cm. 1971.713

Modelled human head mounted on a bone stake;  
hair of cassowary feathers; polychromed face  
inlaid with cowrie and nassa shells; nose pierced  
by a wooden plug.

This representation of a captured head on a  
stake may have formed part of the ceremonial  
fences erected at either end of the spirit house.  
Cassowary feathers are added to increase the  
object's immanent powers.

#### 65. Mask

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.  
Wood, fiber and cowrie shells; red, blue and  
white paint.

Height: 80 cm. 1969.79

Narrow wooden face with sharply projecting  
forehead and a nose which loops to meet the  
chin; loop encloses a smaller echoing curve and  
the tongue. Originally, all but the painted eye  
area would have been encrusted with shells.

This important genre of masks (called "mei"  
by the Iatmul) are worn in numerous rituals,  
the most gruesome of which involves the killing  
of captured enemies by initiated boys. The nose  
is an adaptation of the beak style (see #51) with  
both phallic and totemic associations. Typically,  
the Iatmul have given exaggerated expressive  
force to the motif.

#### 66. Dance Mask With Spirit Figures

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people, probably Kamind-  
imbit village.

Wood and shells; red, black and white paint.

Height 88.5 cm. 1964.30

Wide, flat face with extravagantly curvilinear  
paint patterns accentuating the features; sur-  
mounted by summarily rendered male and  
female figures flanking a pendant snake.

This dance mask features mythological figures,  
perhaps including the snake which is credited  
with making the Sepik River. The stylized war  
paint on the face is elaborated in its convolutions  
to the point of decadence.

#### 67. Mask

Middle Sepik.

Wood; traces of red, yellow, black and white  
pigment.

Height: 51.5 cm. 1969.74

Slightly concave wooden face mask marked by  
protruding tongue and eyes; border of geometric  
patterns in low relief; handle in shape of a  
catfish carved in back.

A third Middle Sepik mask is this example which  
exhibits the so-called "gorgon" motif (open  
mouth with protruding tongue), derived from  
the myth of a primeval man-eating giant who  
was killed and devoured by a pair of twin  
heroes. The story establishes a prototype for  
ritual cannibalism. Hung on the spirit house, the  
mask wards off malevolent spirits.





#### 68. Pottery Bowl

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.

Clay and soot.

Height: 12.5 cm.

1961.163

The art of pottery is practiced chiefly by women in various scattered localities throughout Melanesia. Vessels like this wide, conical bowl covered with swirling spirals are modelled by hand (the potter's wheel was not known until recently) and employed for cooking, storage, trade and occasional ritual purposes.

#### 69. Hand Drum

Middle Sepik, Iatmul people.

Wood, reptile skin and resin; white lime.

Height: 50.5 cm.

1961.11

Hourglass drum with a carved handle at the waist and a reptile skin diaphragm held by a cane ring (missing in this specimen); incised decoration of characteristic Middle Sepik curvilinear forms filled with lime.

Hand-held drums beat a rhythmic accompaniment to ceremonial dances. Pitch is regulated by the application of lumps of resin to the skin.

68.



70.

#### 70. Slit Gong

Middle Sepik.

Wood.

Length: 132 cm.

1968.23

Vertical drum made from a tree-trunk hollowed through a wide, lengthwise incision; composite finial of human face, crocodile head and abstract patterns.

As with flutes and small slit drums, the sound of the sacred gong is regarded as the voice of supernatural beings. The joined animal and human heads may be associated with the primordial, cannibalistic giant (see #67) who appeared in both human and crocodile form. In addition, the wounds inflicted during initiation are, among some Sepik peoples, thought to bear mystical kinship to the incision in the slit gong.

#### 71. Cult Figure

Middle Sepik.

Wood, raffia, reeds and shells; red, black and white pigment.

Height: 89.5 cm.

1966.28

Squat male figure with raffia skirt and reed collar; elaborate scarification marks on upper body; head is oversized with ferociously glaring eyes, gnashing teeth and riotous war paint.

Both this and the following sculpture attest to the extreme emotionalism of Middle Sepik art. Even civilized surroundings and modern fabrication fail to daunt the frightening aspect of this figure. The marks on chest and shoulders represent scars resulting from initiation, during which the body is cut repeatedly and the wounds rubbed with oil to produce grotesque cicatrices.

#### 72. Cult Figure

Middle Sepik.

Wood, shells and raffia; red, black and white paint.

Height: 96.5 cm.

1962.21

Like the previous work, this lugubrious tattooed figure conveys a certain expressive power enhanced by the rude carving, inset eyes and bared teeth.

### 73. Suspension Hook

Middle Sepik.

Wood.

Height: 66.5 cm. 1960.46

Simple, upright male figure with a two-pronged hook extending laterally from feet; hole in forehead for the insertion of a rope.

Hooks of this type hang from the rafters of dwellings and spirit houses. They serve the practical purpose of suspending food and personal belongings out of the reach of rats. Traditionally the hooks are believed to house benevolent spirits, which may be invoked with the aid of an entranced medium and symbolic offerings.

### 74. Lime Container and Spatula

Middle Sepik, Lake Chambri area.

Bamboo, cassowary bone and soot.

Length: 25.5 cm. and 37 cm. 1971.715.a-c

Cylindrical bamboo container delicately engraved with lozenge, triangle and sawtooth patterns darkened with soot. The spatula is a thin, pointed bone, the top of which forms an abstracted cockatoo.

Among the highly decorative objects associated with the betel chewing cult (see #33) are bamboo containers for powdered lime and spatulae for dipping it. The bird on this spatula is presumably a clan totem. Betel chewing ceremonies are intensified immediately before headhunting raids, apparently to quell anxieties.



73.

### 75. Ancestor Figure

Middle Sepik, upper Karawari River.

Wood; traces of red and white pigment.

Height: 77 cm. 1960.89

Raw, gnarled depiction of an ancestor especially notable for its undercut brow, upturned mouth and projecting flange representing a beard around the lower face.

Along the upper reaches of the Karawari and Krosmeri Rivers, conventions of Middle Sepik art blend with those of the Upper Sepik; in this case, the beard and mouth relate to motifs of the Washkuk region of the Upper Sepik. This figure represents a male ancestor, as indicated by the beard and scarification marks on the chest. The absence of genitals is likely due to vandalism by overly zealous Christian missionaries in their attempt to eradicate nudity.

### 76. Debating Stool

Upper Sepik region.

Wood; light red, yellow, blue and white paint.

Height: 42.5 cm. 1963.38

Stool with matched circular base and "seat" joined by four anthropomorphic legs; low relief dot designs polychromed in contrasting colors.

Debating stools are common fixtures in ceremonial houses throughout the Sepik region.

Despite their appearance, they are not seats but platforms which a speaker may strike to emphasize an argument.

### 77. War Shield

Upper Sepik region, probably May River.

Wood, cane and traces of clay; red and white pigments.

Height: 172.5 cm. 1969.78

Irregular oblong shield with cane handles on back; decoration includes a border of triangles around a red ground filled with spirals, dots, and a highly conventionalized human face.

As in the neighboring Central Highlands, shields are fundamental as weapons and as art in the Upper Sepik district. In some areas, the awarding of a shield by elders signals a boy's attainment of maturity. Raised, painted decoration is typical of the April and May River regions.

## **Massim Region, New Guinea**

The Massim area lies at the far eastern tip of New Guinea, trailing off into the Pacific Ocean in a chain of mountainous archipelagos industriously cultivated by their tribal inhabitants. Society is stratified by a recognized class of chieftains, an institution entirely absent on the egalitarian mainland. In terms of class distinctions and of the importance of navigation on the open sea, which forms a vital link between the scattered islands, the Massim differ markedly from other New Guinean cultures.

Ritual and practicality are united in the unique, ceremonial trade operations of the Massim area — in particular, the “kula” exchange, in which two kinds of shell ornament are continuously circulated in opposite directions from island to island through the entire Massim area. The participation of all tribes in this sustained ritual endeavor stimulates trade of goods and promotes peace. Long-term, intertribal contact also produces an art style which is essentially homogeneous throughout the region.

As in the Solomon Islands, the Massim societies have no secret men's cults, cult houses, or initiation rites. Rather, religion manifests itself primarily in the summoning of spirits through appropriate feats of sorcery. In the absence of climactic ritual, Massim art tends to be decorative, controlled and subtle rather than emotionally compelling. Decorative characteristics have become more pronounced since contact with the Western market.



#### 78. Dance Shield

Massim area, Trobriand Islands.

Wood; red and white pigment.

Length: 72 cm.

1960.87

Two perforated plaques of identical curvilinear design arranged as mirror images on either end of a small central grip; red and white polychrome on dark wood.

Surface and volume are entirely integrated in the carved and painted swirls of this elegant shield (called a "kai-diba"), which is twirled in the hand like a baton during lively harvest dances. The treatment of pattern exemplifies the Massim proclivity for abstracting natural shapes — usually birds, fish and snakes — into complex, rhythmic designs. Animal heads are visible at each end of the spiral and in the flattened forms below.

#### 79. Club

Massim area.

Wood and lime.

Length: 67 cm.

1961.164

A cooler side of Massim art is highlighted in this dance club, a simple solid delicately incised with rows of interlocking scrolls. This characteristic motif derives from the stylization of the head and long curved beak of the frigate bird.

#### 80. Ornamental Carving

Massim area.

Wood; red, yellow, blue and white paint.

Length: 91 cm.

1966.25

Wooden plaque with openwork carving of bird heads and curvilinear motifs, polychromed with modern paints.

Although the exact function of this object is not known, it resembles the boards which decorate the lintels of the chiefs' yam storehouses. The unusually vigorous carving exhibits traditional Massim features in the mirror image treatment of the two halves and the stylization of frigate and cockatoo heads.





### 81. Chieftain's Stool

Massim area, Trobriand Islands.

Wood and lime.

Height: 48.5 cm.

1960.155

Hardwood stool with two human figures supporting a round seat; delicate, incised trim filled with white lime.

Secular objects constitute a large share of Massim art. Unlike the debating stool (see #76), this object serves as an honorific chair for a chief. Both the media employed here and the stocky, pear-shaped figures are typical of the regional art.

### 82. Spirit Figure

Massim area, Trobriand Islands.

Wood and lime.

Height: 61.5 cm.

1964.35

Stout, cylindrical, standing female figure with a T-shaped facial arrangement and extremely delicate decorative bands on body.

The Trobriand Islands are especially well known for accomplished craftsmanship. Highly developed carving skills and the magic required for successful art-making are passed from expert to apprentice in one of the few Oceanic societies which systematically trains artists. Large, free-standing figures are a recent addition to the Massim repertory and represent generalized spirits.

### 83. Spirit Figure

Massim area, Trobriand Islands.

Wood and lime.

Height: 56.5 cm.

1964.27

This male figure with the characteristic T formed by brow and nose stands with his right knee raised to support the crooked, right elbow in a curiously casual pose. Massim sculpture may be compared with Sepik works (see #'s 71 and 72) to show the stylistic extremes within New Guinea.

#### 84. Spirit Figure

Massim area, Trobriand Islands.

Wood and lime.

Height: 21.5 cm. 1960.48

Small seated figure with elbows to knees and hands touching chin; toothy grin and headband are incised, whitened triangles.

Diminutive seated figures have been associated with ancient creation myths as well as with the magic governing navigation and gardening. The combination of posture (the so-called "hocker position") and T-shaped face in this work signify a heritage of art conventions from northwest New Guinea.

#### 85. Lime Spatulae

Massim area.

Wood and lime.

Average length: 29 cm. 1963.34.1-6

Carved of ebony or other finely grained hardwood, lime spatulae have reached a peak of refinement in the hands of Massim artisans.

A perfect balance of surface ornamentation and external shape ensues from the clear, flowing spiral, scroll and bird motifs. Betel chewing parties (see #33) are a popular pastime in the Massim area.



#### 86. Lime Gourd

Massim area.

Boab nut and black pigment.

Height: 14.5 cm. 1961.30

Black and red, spherical container made from the fragile shell of a gourd; scroll and dot drawings covering the entire surface.

The fine workmanship of this lime container attests to the esteem accorded to the betel cult. A band of vertical scrolls marks the widest circumference of the gourd; concentric rings of dots and horizontal scrolls taper toward the poles. In the articulation of shape by design, the coloration, and the motifs themselves, this container is surprisingly reminiscent of Archaic Greek vases.

#### 87. Whistles

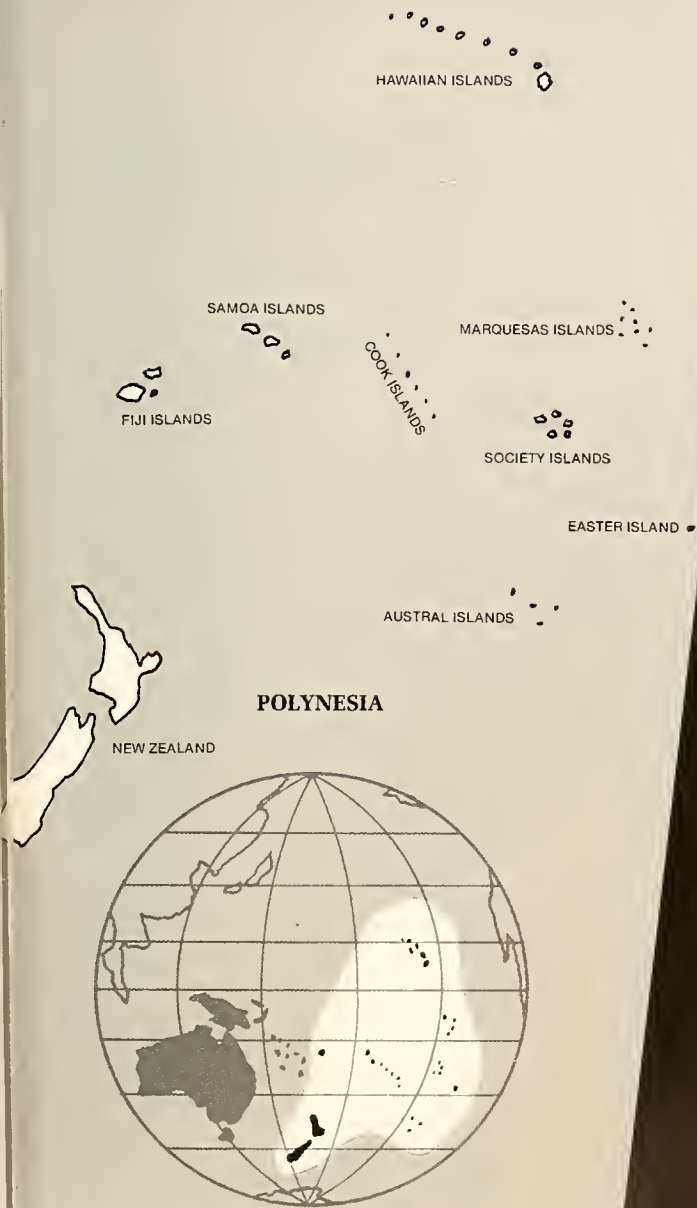
Massim area.

Coconut shell.

Average length: 6.5 cm. 1963.37.1-2

Whistles equipped with two holes to produce sound are a common plaything; these are carved with low relief, curvilinear designs.





## IV. Polynesia

When the last wave of migrants into Oceania reached the far-flung, volcanic islands of Polynesia in the first centuries A.D., their material culture was already well developed in terms of agriculture, navigation, and crafts. The social organizations which evolved subsequently were as rigidly formalized and protocol-oriented as those of Melanesia were fluid and democratic. Polynesian life is structured around a social hierarchy based on lineage: descent through first born children guarantees chieftdom; all other descent patterns are graded accordingly. Rank is so obsessive a concern that, among some tribes, identical objects carry different names depending on the owner's social position. Religion too is stratified with a separate class of hereditary priests who intercede for favors from the gods.

The related concepts of mana and taboo ("tapu") dominate Polynesian belief. Mana is a supernatural power possessed in varying degree by every person and thing in the world. It is manifested in superior skill, efficiency or rank. Mana flows freely between objects on contact; thus, the touch of a lesser person drains power from a highly ranked one. Taboo is designed to counteract the danger of dissipation by forbidding contact between persons or things with different mana levels. Disregarding a taboo is automatically punishable by death. The respect for mana and taboo systematizes all social interaction with a complex, unbreachable set of rules.

Polynesian art reflects its milieu in the dedication to intricacy, technical skill and formal perfection at the expense of individual expression. Images of gods formerly constituted a major portion of the art, but since exposure to the West, the decoration of functional objects has taken first priority. Despite the geographic irony, Polynesian art, dispersed over half the Pacific Ocean, is far more uniform in style than is the art of New Guinea within a few square miles along the Sepik River.



#### 88. War Club

Fiji Islands.

Wood.

Length: 115.5 cm. 1967.52

Heavy, hardwood club forked at striking end; entire surface textured with zones of tiny, tight, rectilinear patterns.

The Fiji Islands are linguistically tied to Melanesia, but in art and social structure, they belong with the Polynesian cultures. Traditionally, the Fijians were a fierce, cannibalistic people, constantly embroiled in raids on neighboring tribes. Their all-important clubs were treated with consummate artistry. According to information accompanying this piece, it was originally collected in 1840. The carving exemplifies the minutely detailed, geometric abstraction typical of Polynesian art.

#### 89. Neck Rest

Fiji Islands.

Wood.

Length: 49.5 cm. 1961.9

Plain, wooden rod supported at ends by horse-shoe legs.

Fiji tribesmen wear extravagant coiffures as a measure of status. Great, shaped hedges of hair may be dyed in fantastic combinations of red, green and blue. The preparation of these confections requires days in advance of ceremonial occasions. Neck rests raise the head above ground during sleep to protect the hairdo. The clean, functional design of this piece typifies the opposite polarity of Polynesian art (see #88).

#### 90. Wedding Mat

Central Polynesia, Samoa.

Dried grasses, red paper and thread; red dye.

Length: 203 cm. 1961.202

Coarsely plaited reed mat streaked with red dye; long fringe border; modern tissue decorations sewn on one side.

The Samoans lavish artistic skills on objects for social use. Plaited mats, sometimes of extreme delicacy, are given as dowries and in other gift exchanges. Although this example is modern, the red paper trim may derive from red feather decorations, a traditional symbol of divinity.

#### 91. Ceremonial Adze

Central Polynesia, Cook Islands.

Wood, stone and sennit.

Height: 64 cm. 1961.160

Smooth stone blade lashed to a base composed of a hollow, truncated pyramid and a sectioned conical form; entire wooden surface carved with repeated rectilinear patterns.

These adzes, derived from actual tools, are non-functional symbols of the god of carpentry. Each god in the Cook Islands is a formalized deity who governs a particular facet of life.

#### 92. Kava Bowl

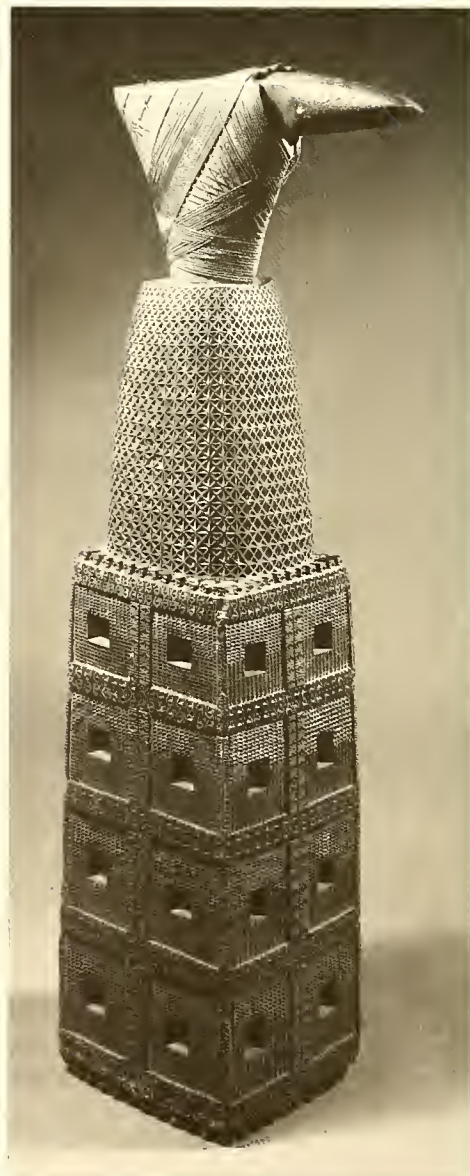
Central Polynesia, Cook Islands.

Wood.

Width: 45.5 cm. 1968.32

Round bowl of lustrous hardwood supported by twelve legs at equal intervals around rim; perforated lug for suspension rope.

Kava is a mildly intoxicating beverage consumed throughout Polynesia from bowls of this type. The preparation and service of kava are dictated by precise rules of etiquette, which effectively sequester high-ranking persons from those with inferior mana.



91.



### 93. Club

Marquesas Islands.

Wood.

Length: 132 cm.

1961.5

Hardwood staff terminating in a Janus-headed carving; faces incised with geometric patterns; features indicated by small, raised faces on each side.

The people of the inhospitable Marquesas Islands were avid cannibals who ate human flesh as choice food rather than for religious purposes. These clubs were carried in human hunts both as weapons and as staffs to lean on for rest. (The indentation at the top fits under the arm.) Since 1850, the clubs have been fabricated exclusively for the market.

### 94. Head

Easter Island.

Stone.

Height: 14 cm.

1964.31

Small, concave human head carved of tufa stone and badly eroded from exposure.

Such heads represent spirits of important ancestors, deified after death. As wood is almost entirely lacking on Easter Island, it is used chiefly for precious ornaments. Abundant, easily carved tufa stone is the predominant sculptural medium.

### 95. Feather Box

New Zealand, Maori people.

Wood and abalone shell.

Length: 38.5 cm.

1969.15.a-b

Canoe-shaped box and lid covered with a symmetrical design of swirls; finials in the form of heads with shell eyes and protruding tongues at either end.

These handsomely crafted boxes (or "waka huia") are containers for prized plumes of the huia bird and other treasures. The boxes are suspended from house rafters for safe-keeping. The protruding tongue signifies aggression and may conceivably be linked to the same motif in Sepik art (see #67).

New Zealand was virtually the last habitable land in the world to be reached by man. The Polynesian peoples (Maori) who sailed there around 900 A.D. found a rich, temperate environment quite unlike the equatorial mountains of Central Polynesia. While some aspects of material culture adapted to the new climate, basic social traits such as the support of an aristocracy and the mana/taboo concepts prevailed. The art of New Zealand departs from Polynesian tradition in its free curvilinearity, although it shares the pursuit of intricacy and technical mastery.

95.



100.

**96. Cannibal Fork**

New Zealand, Maori people.  
Human bone.

Length: 41.5 cm. 1968.58

Long, thin, two-pronged fork with a serrated shaft; topped by a contorted human figure with tongue thrust out.

Special forks and dishes accompanied rampant cannibalism in New Zealand prior to Western intervention. Enemy captives were devoured regardless of age or sex, and relatives of the deceased were expected to avenge the deaths in kind. The cruelest degradation of an enemy was to cook him and then recoil from eating the preparation. Note the specific association of the "gorgon" motif with cannibalism.

**97. Ceremonial Knife**

New Zealand, Maori people.  
Wood, shark's teeth, abalone shell and string.  
Length: 39 cm. 1968.59

This instrument consists of an openwork carving of abstracted birds and animals with a row of shark's teeth forming the cutting edge; it was probably used in ceremonial killings.

**98. War Club**

New Zealand, Maori people.  
Wood and abalone shell.

Length: 36 cm. 1960.55

This and the two following works are variations on the war club, the principal weapon for hand-to-hand combat among the Maori. A warrior strikes his opponents with short, chopping blows rendered deadly by the club's sharp edge. A dog's hide thong threaded through the handle and around the wrist prevents loss. The arabesque profile of this club is emphasized by sweeping engraved spirals at the perimeters.

**99. War Club**

New Zealand, Maori people.  
Wood and abalone shell.

Length: 39 cm. 1962.154

The second club is a figure-eight arrangement of two dark, wooden disks decorated with a baroque exuberance of curves and eddies. The omnipresent face of aggression appears on the handle.

**100. War Club**

New Zealand, Maori people.  
Whale ivory.

Length: 39.5 cm. 1966.39

Fine ivory clubs are both weapons and esteemed personal possessions. The Maori could procure ivory only from beached whales, as they were not equipped to hunt the animals at sea; thus, ivory was rare and endowed with sacred properties. Prized clubs acquired a rich patina with handling. This elegant example is undecorated except for the impish figure clinging to the side and the wheel design on the handle.



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